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ABSTRACT

The writing process depends heavily on linguistic, psycho-perceptual, and psycho-motor abilities. If a student has a significant weakness in one of these major trait clusters, then thinking will suffer and he or she may experience great difficulty in writing. The process of writing can be broken down into four main phases, which can be labeled according to their main purpose: executive, secretarial, editorial, and manuscript production. Strategies for thinking and organizing in the executive phase include generating or brainstorming as many ideas as possible, then discarding irrelevant ideas with the help of small discussion groups. These ideas can then be fleshed out with structured but simple sentences. When functioning as a secretary, the writer must simply get the sentence down on paper with minimal concern for neatness or spelling. Once the draft is written the writer must revise the content, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling. This is an ideal time to teach punctuation. After the draft has been revised, it is ready for production--copying in good handwriting, typing, or entering into electronic memory for printing. This model of the writing process can be used to help pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of a particular writer, and allow the student to approach writing in a step-by step fashion that will not overburden the student's limited conscious attention. (Models illustrating the psycho-mechanics of writing, an executive planning sheet, and an executive composition sheet are included.) (HTH)

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A Model of the Writing Process

for use in teaching and remediating written expression

presented at

The 64th Annual Conference
of the Council for Exceptional Children
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One reason why many average, above average and even very bright students have difficulty writing is because one or two of the more mechanical skills involved interfere with their ability to think as they write.

While writing a person must do several things virtually at the same time. This includes: 1. paying attention to letter formations; 2. paying attention to letter order and sound blending; 3. remembering what one is trying to say; 4. composing sentences that capture one's thoughts; and 5. thinking about the topic at hand.

If we imagine that the amount of "mental energy" or conscious awareness available at any given moment is a fixed, or at least limited quantity, then the various psycho-mechanical requirements ought not to take up too much of that energy in order for most of it to be used for thinking. A pictorial model would look like figure 1.

In this case, the lion's share goes to thinking and a generous share to composing sentences - the two quintessential elements of expression. The remaining psycho-mechanical requirements are then accomplished with a modest amount of conscious attention. This total process depends heavily on three clusters of abilities: 1. the linguistic abilities to translate thought into words - this is basically what we do when we speak; 2. the psycho-perceptual abilities to transform language, which is sound, into visual symbols which accurately represent sound; and 3. the psycho-motor ability to produce written symbols at an adequate speed to keep pace.

If someone is good at all these skills, then writing proceeds as a flow from ideas to written words. Even then the author must proofread the text to make sure it says what he wants and that the word-spellings and punctuation correctly aid the conveyance of meaning. Editing and revising are part of the over-all process of producing written text.

Unfortunately, for those of us who are égalitarians, the range of what makes individuals unique does not stop at our finger prints and favorite songs. Individuals vary tremendously across these abilities. Auditory memory varies, psycho-motor speed and control vary, linguistic skills vary, as does that mysterious cluster of traits required to transform marks on a page into sounds (reading) and vice-versa (spelling).

If a student has a significant weakness in one of the major trait clusters mentioned above, then he or she may experience great difficulties with writing. If any of the major psycho-mechanical components of the writing process requires too much conscious attention, then thinking will suffer. Figure 2 is typical of a student with good verbal skills but mild weaknesses in auditory memory and sound-symbol matching (decoding/encoding).

This is the student who may sound brilliant while giving an oral answer in class but on paper sounds like he doesn't know what he is trying to say. Unfortunately this sort of student is often accused of being lazy, careless or even intentionally belligerent.

APPROACHING THE TEACHING OF A COMPLEX PROCESS:

Writing is a complex process involving many component skills and abilities. In this way it is something like the game of tennis. To play tennis well a person must become good at several aspects of the game; such as, serving,

returning serve, hitting accurate forehands, hitting accurate backhands, compensating for the spin from the opponent's shot, volleying at the net, responding quickly to ball locations, translating a strategy into appropriate action, and so on. All of these component skills serve to enable a person to play a game of tennis. If someone identifies a weakness in their game, they may wish to practice it in isolation; for example, hitting backhands against a wall. However it is only when one can hit backhands against an opponent that one can say his or her "game" is improved. Similarly, the degree to which coaching is given across all the aspects of tennis within a context of playing tennis will determine to what extent a person will raise the overall level of their game.

The process of writing, that is producing written text, can be broken down into four main phases. Each phase depends on certain skills and abilities and is therefore susceptible to certain weaknesses or disabilities. Coaching can and should be directed at identified areas or weakness, but it should always be remembered that splinter skills are only valuable to the extent that they enhance the total game - in this case, producing written text.

The four phases in this process can be labelled according to their main purpose: executive, secretarial, editorial, and manuscript production. Although it is possible to accomplish all four phases simultaneously, as for example one does when writing a letter to a friend, most writing tasks require that editing and final copying be done after the rough draft is produced. Producing the rough draft itself is the core of this process and it involves juggling the five basic writing skills mentioned at the beginning: 1. paying attention to letter formation; 2. paying attention to letter order and sound blending; 3. remembering what one is trying to write; 4. composing sentences that capture one's thoughts; and 5. thinking about the topic at hand.

If one accepts that what is being written at first is a draft, then the requirements for paying too much attention to spelling and neatness are automatically reduced. For most children this system of writing a rough draft, then proofreading it and making a good copy is sufficient to enable them to play a good game and produce good written texts. A good text is one which accurately conveys the writer's ideas at least on par with their ability to verbally express those ideas.

For some children, this draft-revise-copy paradigm is insufficient since they have weaknesses which seriously interfere with the production of even

a rough draft. Furthermore many writing tasks, such as typical homework, seatwork, and exams, do not allow for the last two phases and students are therefore evaluated on their ability to produce first drafts. In these situations the increased emphasis on appearance, legibility and spelling places inordinate demands on their conscious attention and this blocks composition and thinking. Such a case might be considered a pure writing disability if the subject's language skills are basically sound.

For these reasons the basic writing function revolves around the successful relationship between the executive and secretarial phases. Only when this works to produce good drafts can one apply editorial proofreading skills.

A MODEL OF THE TOTAL WRITING PROCESS:

The four phases in the writing process are characterized by the various task requirements of each phase (Figure 3). Each phase is also dependent on certain skills and abilities. Analyzing these tasks and requisite skills suggests certain strategies to assist their accomplishment.

EXECUTIVE	SECRETARIAL	EDITORIAL	MANUSCRIPT PRODUCTION	Phase
Composition	Transcription	Revision	Copying	Main task
think speak remember	write it down	proofread -content -language structure -punctuation -spelling	reproduce -penmanship -typing -word processors	subtasks
language auditory memory	sound-symbol matching (decoding/encoding)	language visual memory text skills	psycho-motor speed sound-symbol matching	Requisite skills and abilities

(Figure 3 : Model of the Total Writing Process)

Phaes I : The Executive Function

In this phase the writer must think about the topic, plan an overall idea structure, explicate each idea into normal sentences, and then remember the sentence for transcription. To do this the writer must have a sufficient information base to think about. This is usually accomplished by research into the topic, stimulation of the imagination and/or relating the topic to one's previous base of experience.

The writer must then be able to explicate thought into words. This depends on basic language skills. Students with specific language problems require specific remediation in this area before they can be expected to write well. Clearly, speaking well must precede writing well; however this does not refer to speech problems such as articulation. Extra practice is required in speaking, discussing and explaining verbally as well as guided composition in which model sentences and paragraphs are simply copied to practice language structure.

Once the thought is transformed into the structure of a sentence, then the writer must be able to remember this sentence despite the interference of competing processes such as making letters correctly or spelling individual words.

Some strategies for each requisite task:

Executive task 1 : Thinking and organizing:

Before organizing ideas it is best to generate as many ideas as possible. Brain-storming techniques are helpful. Lists of ideas associated with the topic can then be organized by whatever criteria best serves the writer's purpose. For this reason it is important for the writer to consciously decide the purpose behind the writing assignment. An example of an executive planning sheet is shown in Figure 4.

(Insert Figure 4)

Once the ideas are in front of the writer, she can make the executive decision about which are relevant and which are not, and how they might fit together. This can be practised in small discussion groups in which the writer can talk about the ideas with other students. Thinking is basically talking with yourself and it requires practice. Talking with others is the easiest

way to think about something.

After discussion the writer can omit or add ideas and then set some priority to them. Then he can begin the composition process.

Executive task 2 and 3 : Composing Sentences and Remembering:

At this point the writer is ready to flesh out her ideas into full thoughts and then to think of ways of elaborating or supporting the main thoughts. An executive composition sheet (Figure 5) should allow for the composition of structured but simple sentences. This step becomes less and less necessary as students become good at composing sentences.

In order to help the student remember the sentence, he should compose it first in his mind (or aloud if possible) then when he likes the way it sounds, repeat it once or twice before writing it down. When this is done, each group of simple sentences can be combined if possible into more complex sentences which are similarly rehearsed before being written down.

One very effective way to practice joining ideas is to have students think of sentences containing up to four or five given ideas; such as, camel, sand dune, desert, oasis. Students first say their sentence out loud, then repeat it (a few times if auditory recall is weak) and then write it down. The results of this exercise make it quite clear that many poor writers do not suffer from an inability to compose complex syntactical structures but rather an inability to compose them and write them at the same time.

Phase II : The Secretarial Function

When functioning as secretary, the writer must simply get the sentence down on paper with minimal concern for neatness or spelling. Just as an office secretary may use shorthand, the writer need only get the sentence down in a form understandable to himself - unless it will be edited by someone else.

Phase III : The Editorial Function

Once the draft is written the writer must then employ four separate revisions. The first is to check that the content is correct. This may involve leaving out sentences or adding some. Then the writer must check each sentence structure to make sure it accurately captures the thought and is unambiguous. The third and fourth checks are for punctuation and spelling. This is the ideal time to teach punctuation since punctuation in fact is simply a set of

visible marks to assist the reader in getting the meaning from the text. Commas, quotation marks, periods all have very pragmatic purposes and these are best learned in the context in which they need to be used. Proofreading for spelling can also be shared with a writing partner, the teacher or anyone else who spells well.

Phase IV : Manuscript Production

After the draft has been revised, it is ready for production. This could be copying in "good handwriting", typing, entering into electronic memory for printing. Young children and children with psycho-motor problems need help at this point in order to produce quality text. Typing skills are very useful but not easily acquired for some children. Word processors are helpful for draft production, revision and text printing. Teachers and/or older students can also help.

Summary

Many of the ideas suggested above have been part of good writing programs for some time. However the relative importance of teaching children how to control the whole writing process has been greatly neglected. One reason for this is that most teachers, and certainly most English teachers, are themselves good writers in the sense that for them the process is relatively unencumbered from idea to written text. Naturally gifted athletes tend to make poor coaches mainly because they do not really know how they do what they do so well. Major League batting coaches are usually players whose talents were modest but who worked hard to become good hitters; therefore they have had to understand the complex process of hitting. Similarly schooling has been the domain of people who typically did well in school. For this reason writing has traditionally be viewed as it merely appears to be, the process of putting one's ideas on paper. The psycho-mechanics have been either totally neglected or haphazardly treated by writing strategies which work for some but not for others.

In fact, writers vary in their particular patterns of strengths and weaknesses and need therefore a balanced program which can enable each writer

to capitalize on strengths and compensate for weaknesses.

This model of the writing process can be used to help pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of a particular writer. An analysis of a student's writing can yield valuable information about what that student does well or poorly. This can also be supplemented by general psycho-educational testing. However the greatest benefit of having the writing process broken down into a series of phases and subtasks is that each student can thereby approach writing in a step-by-step fashion which will avoid overburdening the limited conscious attention and therefore allow full concentration on each step. In this way even tasks which may depend on a given student's particular weakness have that student's full concentration for that moment in the process. If, for example, someone is weak in short-term auditory recall (remembering the very sentence they are composing), then that step is given full concentration before proceeding to the next step - writing it down.

There are several advantages to this overall model of the writing process. It is easily understood because the phases are in fact a natural division of main tasks. Furthermore each subtask easily translates into teachable lessons for isolated practice. A writing program, whether remedial or for regular classroom use, can be easily designed to introduce and practice the requisite skills within the framework of the total writing process. The model can also be adapted for the full range of students from beginning writers in the primary grades to even advanced writers in university.

The purpose for using this model is to not only enable students to write better by teaching them with a systematic approach, but to enable them to control the process for themselves. A working understanding of this model provides students with the cognitive skills necessary to consciously employ their full concentration to each step by knowing precisely what they are doing at any moment in the process.

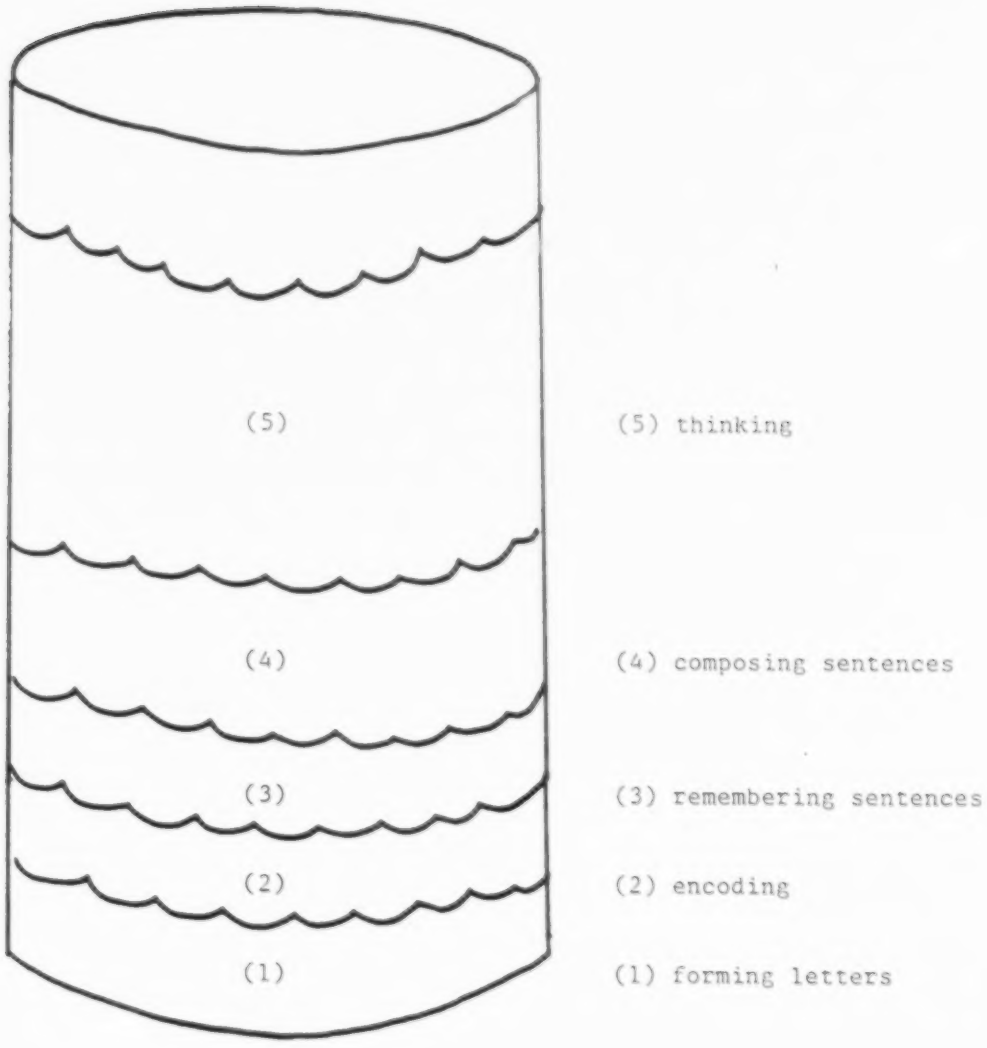

Figure 1 - Model of the psycho-mechanics of writing

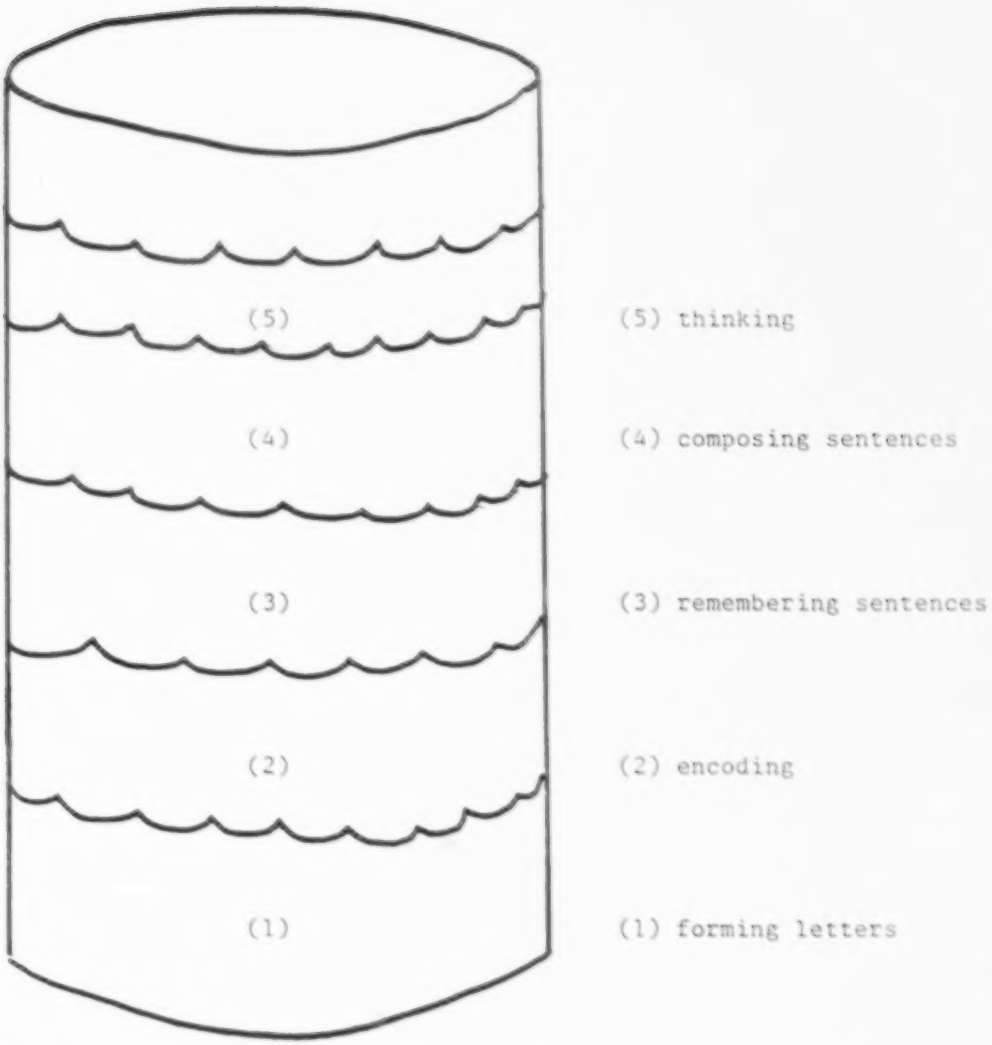

Figure 2 - How the psycho-mechanics of writing can interfere with thinking

Figure 4 - Executive Planning Sheet

Topic: _____

Purpose for writing: _____

_____

General ideas on the topic:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Figure 5 - Executive Composition Sheet

Topic: _____

Idea _____

Main sentence _____

_____

Supporting sentence _____

Supporting sentence _____

_____

Idea _____

Main sentence _____

_____

Supporting sentence _____

_____

Supporting sentence _____

_____

Idea _____

Main sentence _____

_____

Supporting sentence _____

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Supporting sentence _____

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